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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined an alternative learning program in a large urban school district in the midwestern United States. The goal of the project was to determine if the specific alternative learning program could have a positive effect on student motivation, goal orientation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Research was based upon existing research in motivational theory. Data were gathered through a pre- and post-test questionnaire of 32 students who successfully completed the program and returned to their home schools. The results offer guarded support for the alternative educational program. Student motivation and self-esteem appear to be positive outcomes of the program; however, the positive outcomes were significant only for students who successfully completed the program. Although the program staff reported a success rate of 87 percent, a more accurate success rate may be closer to 39 percent. Three tables are included. (Contains 40 references.) (LMI)

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An Evaluation of Success in an Alternative Learning Program:

Motivational Impact vs. Completion Rate

ED 410 646

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Abstract

The present study examined an alternative learning program and its effect on student motivation and self-esteem in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The dependent variables of interest were student motivation, goal orientation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. The goal of this project was to determine if this specific alternative learning program could have a positive effect on the variables described above. Additionally, this project was intended to provide feedback in the form of a status report to the local school system regarding the effectiveness of their program. This research was based upon existing research in motivational theory, and on additional programs that provide alternative forms of educational service for at-risk students. Interviews were also conducted with students and staff members of the alternative program in an effort to provide anecdotal information in support of the data that was collected.

An Evaluation of Success in an Alternative Learning Program: Motivational Impact vs. Completion Rate

Introduction

Since the inception of the annual Gallop Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools in 1969, classroom management and school discipline has been the public's primary educational concern on 16 occasions. From 1986 to 1991, discipline was viewed as second to drug use as the biggest problem facing public schools (Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1994). In a 1987 study for the Center for Educational Statistics, 44% of public school teachers reported more disruptive classroom behavior in their schools than five years earlier. School administrators also perceive a widespread increase in school violence (Boothe,1993) and teachers suggest that student misbehavior interferes significantly with their teaching (Mansfield, Alexander and Farris, 1991; Elam,1989). Gump (1967) reported that approximately half of teachers' actions involved instruction while the rest of the teachers' behavior involved management functions, dealing with misbehavior, and handling individual student problems. Classroom management and student discipline issues are not a new phenomenon.

Forty years of research and publications such as Brown's work (1949) stating that twenty-five percent of all teachers who fail and eventually resign their teaching positions do so because of growing concerns of student

misbehavior and Schubert's (1954) report that one of the most perplexing problems facing many teachers in our schools today (in 1954) is that of maintaining control of the classroom, indicate that classroom management and student misbehavior continues to be a major concern of educators.

While classroom management and student discipline is a clear concern of teachers, parents, and local communities, the effectiveness and the impact of programs such as in-school suspension, out-of school suspension and expulsion of students continues to be an area of great debate. While many in-school and out-of-school suspension programs provide effective ways to impose disciplinary consequences without disrupting the educational process, several concerns have been identified as they relate specifically to in-school suspension programs.

The practice of out-of-school suspension has also come under specific scrutiny in the research literature due to its link to several negative outcomes including academic failure, grade retention, negative school attitudes, and increased drop-out rates. Suspending at-risk students for truancy often had the intended effect of increasing rather than decreasing truancy as students perceive the suspension to be a lack of caring (Massachusetts Board of Education,1991). These students tend to participate less in extracurricular activities, are more likely to be placed in special education programs, receive poorer grades and attend school less often than do one-time suspendees or students who have never been suspended. A growing consensus of educational researchers maintain that out-of-school suspension is strongly linked to school failure, non-promotion,

continued disciplinary problems and eventual school drop out (Oppenheimer & Ziegler,1988), is often used disproportionately among minority students (Uchitelle, Bartz & Hillman,1989), can contribute to delinquent behavior in the community (Alpert & Dunham,1986), can be ineffective in changing disruptive behavior (Comerford & Jacobson,1987), is perhaps the most powerful message of rejection contributing to student disengagement from school (Wheelock & Dorman,1988), can lead to emotional and psychological trauma and recurring behavioral problems, and can invite a cycle of behavior and expectation which is very difficult for both the student and school system to overcome (Comerford & Jacobson,1987). Oppenheimer even suggests that the community loses by becoming responsible for the many students out of school each day without proper supervision with their eventual return to the school setting presenting even more serious academic and reintegration problems (Oppenheimer & Ziegler,1988).

Alternative Programs

Nationally, it is estimated that between 15% to 30% of students will drop out before they finish high school (Richardson and Griffin, 1994). This figure is significantly higher for African-Americans, Hispanics, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. While research about alternative schools is still in its infancy, several common attributes are essential if these schools are to be effective. Recent findings have shown that effective programs include staff members that provide a great deal of warm, personal support, and

with a universal attitude that students are not permitted to fail (Gold, 1995, p.8). Alternative programs tend to have their greatest success when they are first started (DeBlois, 1994) due to the fact that in the early stages, teachers are enthusiastic, expectations are high, and the program is highly visible. However over time, problems surface when the program is forced to accept students who will not benefit from the program. Often these students are placed in an alternative program because the district has no other sources for placement. As the mission of the school begins to shift, the teachers who started the program begin to transfer out. New teachers assigned to the program may not want to be there. Therefore, what begins as an alternative educational program designed for specific students and implemented by energetic and enthusiastic staff, slowly develops a reputation as a dumping ground for problem students and ineffective teachers. When this occurs, student motivation becomes a critical factor to explore.

Self -Efficacy

Self-efficacy pertains to an individual's personal evaluation or confidence in his or her performance capability on a specific task. Bandura (1986) argued that an individual's efficacy beliefs influence motivation in several ways. Individuals with low self-esteem will tend to avoid activities they believe are beyond their capabilities so they selectively choose easier tasks where the chances for success are greater. The amount of effort an individual invests in an activity and the level of persistence at difficult tasks is also linked to efficacy. The greater our self-efficacy, the greater our effort and persistence

should be thus leading to improved achievement. Ames (1984) and Nichols and Miller (1994) have found that students' self-perceptions of ability (self-efficacy) are positively related to achievement and student motivation. We hypothesize that in an effective alternative learning program, gains in student self-efficacy and persistence should be outcomes of a successful program.

Goal Orientation

Dweck and Leggett (1988) have distinguished between two motivational patterns, the "mastery" response, in which challenging tasks are sought and effort is increased in the face of difficulty, and the "helpless" response, in which challenge is avoided and performance decrements follow the onset of task difficulty. Underlying these motivation patterns are differences in goal-orientation. The helpless motivational pattern is associated with a "performance goal orientation." Individuals with performance goals are concerned with positive evaluations of their abilities in comparison to others, either from a teacher, peer group or self evaluations. These individuals may avoid challenging tasks and exhibit low persistence when difficulties are encountered. Individuals with mastery motivational patterns tend to have "learning goal orientations." These individuals are interested in increasing their competency on a task. Their primary goal is to obtain knowledge and improve their skills. Individuals with learning goals seek reasonable challenges and persist under adversity, while those with performance goals avoid challenging tasks and display low persistence when difficulties arise. Learning goal oriented students have been shown to increase in achievement on tasks and to be more persistent following failure as compared to performance goal individuals (Diener & Dweck,1978). Students with learning goals are also more likely to report

engaging in self regulatory activities such as the use of monitoring, planning and cognitive strategies (Ames & Archer, 1988; Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988; Nolen, 1988). Students who adopt learning goals also tend to find the subject matter they study more intrinsically rewarding (Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988; Miller, Behrens, Greene and Newman, 1993; Nichols & Miller, 1994).

Effective alternative learning programs should promote increases in student's self-efficacy and also their ability to regulate their activities, both of which should increase their intrinsic valuing of the educational setting. Additionally, if gains are seen on these variables then it might be predicted that increases in student learning goal orientations might also be observed.

Self-Esteem

Woolfolk (1995) defines self-esteem as our evaluation of our own self-concept or to be more specific, the value that each of us places on our own abilities and behaviors. The developing self-esteem of an individual is influenced by parents and other family members in the early years and by friends, teachers, and schoolmates as the child continues to grow. Before the age of 7, children tend to see themselves in global terms. If they have a positive self-esteem, they assume they are good in all areas of performance (Harter, 1990). As children mature, their views of themselves become more differentiated, therefore allowing multiple concepts of the self to be developed. Impacting these broad arenas are the relationship of the developing child to their family, school, and peers. Students with greater self-esteem are more likely to be successful academically in school (Marsh, 1990). In addition, higher self-esteem is related to more favorable attitudes toward school, more positive

behavior in the classroom, and greater popularity with other students (Cauley & Tyler, 1989; Metcalf, 1981; Reynolds, 1980). An abundance of research exists to support the fact that a student's self-esteem becomes more impacted by their peer group, especially in the adolescent years (Gordon, 1975; Marsh, 1987; Rubin, 1980; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982; Slavin, 1994;). A devastating experience can result in the transition from the familiar home environment to the school environment where peer evaluations can become crucial. Peng and his colleagues (Peng, Lee, Wang & Walberg, 1992) determined that at-risk students can be resilient in their efforts to succeed despite negative peer group influence by promoting motivational variables that link intrinsic valuing of the learning task and the promotion of an internal locus of control. McMillian (McMillian & Reed, 1993) attributes the lack of student academic performance to internal factors such as lack of effort, not caring, or not trying. McMillian also suggests that the link between self-esteem and self-efficacy is important; students view themselves as being successful because they have chosen to be so, and give much credit to themselves for their own success. According to McMillian , resilient students (those that are successful despite their backgrounds) do not believe that school, neighborhoods or family are critical in either their success or failure. Although environmental background may certainly make things more difficult, their performance is not typically blamed on these factors.

The present study used a self-report questionnaire to assess changes in motivation as students entered and exited from an alternative program in a large urban school district. Additionally, changes in student self-esteem were assessed in the three areas of home, school, and peer relationships. An historical background of the program from its time of inception was also compiled along with interviews from current staff members and students.

Method

Treatment

The alternative learning program under investigation was implemented in 1989. Its purpose is to provide a program that will develop self-esteem and social skills in at-risk youth so that they may become productive citizens. The intention of the program is to provide a short term alternative instructional program for those students in grades 6-12 who have lost the privilege of attending their home school site. Students who have shown they cannot function effectively in a traditional classroom setting or who have displayed a need for a specialized program to be able to continue their education, are prime candidates and must be referred by administrators from the home school for placement in the program. The program is divided into two levels of both middle school and high school learning areas. To progress from one level to the next, students must display appropriate behavior choices, attend all counseling classes, and pass all academic classes. Also provided are daily classes centering around instruction in pro-social skills and planning skills, skills for dealing with feelings, skill alternatives to aggression, and skills to help with stress management. Each student receives special attention to address his or her specific needs through individual conferences and group counseling sessions presented by qualified staff and consultants in the community.

An abbreviated form of Glasser's Reality Therapy (Glasser,1965) is used to address inappropriate student behavior. To accomplish this, the program is designed to enable students to make responsible choices by using a self-evaluation process for behavior management. The staff also provides a significant portion of the curriculum toward self-esteem instruction and appropriate student responses to authority figures. The program provides skill-building instruction for students with deficiencies in academics, time management and /or social communication skills.

Participants

The alternative learning program under review serves a wide range of students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. During the first year of the program, 207 students were served. The following year (1991-1992), 231 students received services and of this number, 102 successfully completed the program and of this number, 89 returned and remained in their home school for the rest of the year. These data were interpreted by the alternative program staff to mean that its success rate was 87%. In 1992-93, 219 students received services with 57 successfully completing the program and returning to their home school sites. In 1993-94, 245 students were served and reports showed 83 successfully completed the program. In an earlier pilot study Nichols and his colleagues (1996) found similar numbers of students successfully completing the program during the 1994-95 academic year. Among students successfully completing the program, significant increases in

various aspects of student self-esteem and motivation were observed (Nichols, et al., 1996).

The 32 participants who completed the pre and posttest questionnaire were a random sample of students drawn from 1995-96 who successfully completed the alternative learning program and were placed back in their home school site.

Instrument

A 66 item Likert-type questionnaire was developed to assess various aspects of student motivation and self-esteem. The items were randomly ordered using a five point scale with "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" at the extremes. Subcategories on the motivation/self-esteem questionnaire were as follows: learning goals (4 items), performance goals (6 items), intrinsic motivation (5 items), extrinsic motivation (5 items), self-efficacy (6 items), persistence (6 items), self-regulation (5 items), peer self-esteem (10 items), school self-esteem (10 items), home self-esteem (10 items). Variations of this questionnaire reflecting the motivation items have been used by Miller and Nichols and their colleagues (Miller, Behrens, Greene, & Newman, 1993; Miller, Greene, Nichols, & Montalvo, 1994; Nichols & Miller,1994; Nichols,1996; Nichols, Utesch, Smith and Bredemeyer,1996) on related research projects.

Procedure

Students who were referred by their home building site administrators completed the questionnaire on their initial entry and subsequent exit from the 12 week program. A staff member was available to assist students in completing the pretest survey in an oral format when necessary.

Results

Reliability Analysis

Questionnaire items which were intended to measure persistence, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, learning goals, performance goals, home self-esteem, school self-esteem, and peer self-esteem were analyzed to establish subscale reliabilities. Reliabilities on the pretest and posttest questionnaire ranged from $r = .51$ to $r = .89$. Table 1 is provided for a complete list of subscale reliability indices for the pre and posttest questionnaire. Similar subscale reliabilities have been observed on the motivation items on previous projects (Miller et al., 1994; Miller et al., 1993; Nichols & Miller, 1994; Nichols, 1996; Nichols & Utesch, 1996).

Data Analysis

The correlations among variables were consistent with theoretical predictions and findings which provide added support to the construct validity of the subscales. Important to note were the significant correlations ($p < .01$)

throughout the project between, learning goals and intrinsic motivation (.73, .84), learning goals and self-efficacy (.82, .86), and self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (.69, .76). Also important to note were the significant correlations ($p < .05$) between home self-esteem and school self-esteem (.51, .46). Table 2 provides a complete correlational matrix of subscales for the pretest questionnaire. Table 3 provides descriptive data for the pre and posttest questionnaire.

Treatment Effects

Increases on several variables of interest were observed when the pretest and posttest results were analyzed using ANCOVA with the pretest responses serving as covariates. Results for the learning goal subscale revealed an increase for students completing the alternative learning program $F(1,30) = 2.61$, $p = .015$. Students completing the program also experienced significant increases in self-regulation $F(1,30) = 3.91$, $p = .001$, and a significant increase in school self-esteem $F(1,30) = 2.40$, $p = .026$, and peer self-esteem $F(1,30) = 2.19$, $p = .038$.

Additional Findings

The alternative learning program employs 12.5 faculty, 2 administrators, and 20 additional staff and has an operating budget of $1,035,078 per year. The staff also participates in four lengthy in-service training sessions before the year begins. Current administrators at the alternative program praise the

program and state that since the program began, they have had a "constant stream of visitors from other school districts around the state. When people visit the program, talk to the students, and see the program in action, they are amazed at all we offer as well as student response to the services they receive." According to the staff, they continually receive feedback from students stating that "they appreciate the warmth and assistance they receive from the staff or the fact they are successful for the first time in their lives." Program success or failure can been determined in a number of ways. Anecdotal comments from staff members and from students completing the program suggest that for some students, the alternative program can be a positive experience.

The pilot study (Nichols et al., 1996) and the current quantitative findings suggest that in some instances, student motivation and some aspects of school self-esteem may also be impacted for those students completing the program. Although the administrators and staff of the alternative program consider their program to be an effective one, questions continue to arise concerning the number of students who fail to complete the program, as well as the increase in recent years in male and minority participants. Although the program staff suggests a success rate of 87% (89 of 102 students completing the program remained in their home school for the rest of the year), a more accurate success rate may be closer to 39% in that these successful students totaled 89 from an original alternative learning pool of 231 students (less than 50% of these students actually completed the program). Forty percent of the students who begin the program and fail to finish eventually dropped out of

school compared to 17% of students who dropped out after completing the program. Of the 315 high school students attending the program last year, 15 have graduated and 119 are presently still attending the local school system. Of those presently attending, a large portion are presently receiving "D's" and "F's" in core academic areas.

Conclusion

The results give guarded support for this alternative educational program, as well as to the theoretical assumptions concerning some factors of student motivation and self-esteem that appear to be positive outcomes of this alternative learning program. However, these positive outcomes are only significant for students who successfully complete the program. In the future, the real issue to explore is how to make alternative learning programs more successful for a greater number of students. The definition of program success is a key element in this and any project that deals with alternative educational programs. We are encouraged by these findings and continue to explore the effects of alternative educational programs on student motivation, self-esteem and academic achievement.

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Table 1

Reliability Indices for the Pretest and Postest Student Questionnaire (n = 32)

Subscales	Pre	Post
Learning Goals (4)	.92	.88
Performance Goals (6)	.87	.89
Intrinsic Motivation (5)	.78	.89
Extrinsic Motivation (4)	.51	.50
Efficacy (6)	.65	.85
Self-Regulation (5)	.82	.82
Peer Self-Esteem (10)	.82	.62
School Self-Esteem (10)	.72	.77
Home Self-Esteem (10)	.87	.83

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of questions for that subscale. Numbers listed under pre and post columns reflect alpha reliability coefficients.

Table 2

Correlations Among Pretest Subscales (n = 32)

	Subscales	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.	Learn goal	--									
2.	Perform goal	.58**	--								
3.	Intrinsic mot.	.73**	.26	--							
4.	Extrinsic mot.	.76**	.52**	.47*	--						
5.	Self-efficacy	.82**	.63**	.69**	.71**	--					
6.	Persistence	.07	-.16	-.16	.11	-.19	--				
7.	Self-regulation	.78**	.52**	.59**	.69**	.65**	.10	--			
8.	Peer self-Esteem	.38*	.23	.12	.43*	.32	-.14	.46*	--		
9.	School self-esteem	.69**	.44*	.53**	.52**	.45*	.14	.40*	.10	--	
10.	Home self-esteem	.37	.12	.18	.33	.13	.51**	.25	-.09	.51**	--

Note: Significant correlations re indicated by *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 3

Pretest and Posttest Descriptive Statistics

Subscales	(n = 32) Pretest		(n = 32) Posttest	
	x	sd	x	sd
Learning goals	3.20	1.01	3.64*	.63
Performance goals	2.92	.97	3.18	.99
Intrinsic motivation	3.18	.77	3.16	1.03
Extrinsic Motivation	3.53	.64	3.79	.62
Self-Efficacy	3.85	.61	3.74	.74
Persistence	2.83	.48	3.11	.74
Self-Regulation	3.14	.95	3.64**	.84
Peer Self-Esteem	2.92	.25	3.20*	.61
School Self-Esteem	2.98	.34	3.25*	.54
Home Self-Esteem	2.90	.29	3.00	.50

Note: Asterisks denote significant differences from pretest to posttest assessment *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.